

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-11

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 ICA-11
IO-13 SSM-03 HA-05 EUR-12 MCT-01 /099 W
-----049820 021330Z /42 11

R 021021Z JUN 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8262
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
USINT BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
SECDEF WASHDC
DIA WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 3187

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (TEXT)

E.O. 11652: XGDS-4
TAGS: PINT, SY
SUBJECT: INTERNAL ROUNDUP: MORE ANTI-REGIME VIOLENCE AND SOME
GOVERNMENT TRANSFERS

1. SUMMARY: LABORATORIES AT DAMASCUS UNIVERSITY SUFFERED
EXTENSIVE FIRE DAMAGE AND ARSON IS SUSPECTED. IT NOW
APPEARS THAT A NUMBER OF ANTI-REGIME ARSON INCIDENTS
OCCURRED AROUND THE COUNTRY, PERHAPS, RELATED TO THE
UNPOPULAR INCREASE IN FUEL OIL PRICES. NATIONAL ASSEMBLY
DEPUTIES IN AN ALMOST UNPRECEDENTED DISPLAY OF BACKBONE
SUCCESSFULLY LOBBIED THE GOVERNMENT FOR A PARTIAL PRICE
ROLLBACK. REGIME CONTINUES UNSUCCESSFULLY TO HUNT FOR
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ITS ENEMIES AND EXPANDS THE SCOPE OF THE SEARCH TO PALE-
STINIANS AND ALAWITES. IT APPEARS THAT SEVERAL SOLDIERS
AND CIVILIANS WERE KILLED IN SOCCER RIOT ON MAY 26. MEANWHILE,
GOVERNMENT IS TRANSFERRING SOME PROVINCIAL GOVERNORS AND
ALL THREE DAMASCUS NEWSPAPERS NOW HAVE NEW EDITORS. END
SUMMARY.

2. IN THE EARLY MORNING HOURS OF MAY 31 DAMASCUS UNIVERSITY SCIENCE LABORATORIES CAUGHT FIRE AND DAMAGE WAS QUITE EXTENSIVE. THIS FOLLOWS INCIDENTS ON MAY 21 IN WHICH THREE OR FOUR GOVERNMENT-OWNED "COOPERATIVE STORES" AND TWO SIMILAR STORES IN HOMS BURNED AS THE RESULT OF ARSON. SEVERAL OTHER SUCH FIRES MAY ALSO HAVE OCCURRED IN ALEPPO. POLOFF HEARD IDENTICAL STORY FROM TWO SEPARATE SOURCES THAT ARSONISTS ARE BELIEVED TO BE USING A CHEMICAL WHICH IGNITES AFTER BEING EXPOSED TO AIR FOR A PERIOD OF TIME. THESE FIRES OCCURRED AT A TIME WHEN MANY CITIZENS WERE ANGERED BY A GOVERNMENT-DECREED INCREASE IN MAZOUT PRICES (FUEL OIL). SIMILAR INCIDENTS OCCURRED IN FALL 1977 WHEN THE GOVERNMENT WAS TRYING TO HAVE ALL FRUITS AND VEGETABLES MARKETED THROUGH GOVERNMENT-OWNED SHOPS. WE ALSO HAVE AN UNCONFIRMED REPORT THAT SOME DISTURBANCES OCCURRED IN ALEPPO IN PROTEST AGAINST THE PRICE INCREASE.

3. THE MAZOUT PRICE INCREASE WAS SUFFICIENTLY UNPOPULAR THAT MANY SYRIAN DEPUTIES WERE MOVED TO MAKE ALMOST UNPRECEDENTED ATTACKS ON THE GOVERNMENT'S POLICY. A MAJOR POLICY ADDRESS BY PM HALABI WAS DELAYED FOR SEVERAL DAYS WHILE THE DEPUTIES DEBATED THE ISSUE. JUNE 1 PRESS ANNOUNCED A PARTIAL ROLLBACK IN THE MAZOUT INCREASES AND AN INCREASE IN THE PRICE OF KEROSENE, WHICH HAD BECOME CONSIDERABLY CHEAPER THAN MAZOUT, LEADING MERCHANTS TO MIX THE TWO AND CHARGE THE HIGHER MAZOUT PRICES.

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4. SYRIAN EFFORTS TO LOCATE ARSONISTS AND ASSASSINS STILL APPEAR INEFFECTUAL. A DELEGATION OF SUNNI IMAMS FROM THE WORKING CLASS MIDANI AREA OF DAMASCUS RECENTLY VISITED MININT DABBAGH TO COMPLAIN AGAINST THE ARREST AND MISTREATMENT OF CONSERVATIVE MUSLIMS, PROTESTING THAT THESE WERE MEN CONCERNED WITH SPIRITUAL AND NOT POLITICAL AFFAIRS. THE AUTHORITIES THEMSELVES MAY HAVE STARTED TO LOOK FURTHER AFIELD FOR THE PERPETRATORS OF ANTI-REGIME ACTIVITY. A NUMBER OF PFLP SUPPORTERS IN A HOMS REFUGEE CAMP WERE RECENTLY ARRESTED, AND WE HAVE ALSO HEARD THAT SOME ALAWITES BELIEVED TO BE JADID SUPPORTERS WERE DETAINED AND INTERROGATED. THUS FAR, ASSAD HAS BEEN SUCCESSFUL IN PREVENTING HIS SUPPORTERS FROM TAKING REVENGE KILLINGS AGAINST SUNNIS, BUT HEAVY-HANDED SECURITY METHODS ARE INFLAMING PASSIONS.

5. MININFO ISKANDAR AHMAD HINTED AT ASSAD'S DESIRE NOT TO OVERREACT TO ANTI-REGIME VIOLENCE IN AN INTERVIEW HE GAVE TO TISHRIIN ON MAY 27. HE REFERRED TO RECENT INCIDENTS AS "POLITICAL CRIMES" WHICH SYRIA'S ENEMIES BELIEVE WILL AFFECT SYRIA'S WILL AND POLICIES. "WHENEVER ANY CRIME OCCURS IN SYRIA WE SEE THAT ISRAELI INTELLIGENCE IS OVERJOYED...OUR ONLY REPLY

WILL BE AS IT ALWAYS HAS BEEN--MORE AWARENESS OF THE NATURE OF THESE CRIMES AND AN INSISTENCE ON SAFEGUARDING NATIONAL UNITY AND RAISING THE BANNER OF PAN-ARABISM." AHMAD DID NOT DIRECTLY ACCUSE IRAQ OF COMPLICITY BUT LATER IN THE INTERVIEW CHARGED THAT THE IRAQI REGIME IS COMMITTED TO WEAKENING SYRIA.

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IO-13 SSM-03 HA-05 EUR-12 MCT-01 /099 W
-----048621 021137Z /11

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6. MEANWHILE, REPORTS CONTINUED TO CIRCULATE THAT SEVERAL SOLDIERS AND CIVILIANS WERE KILLED IN THE SOCCER RIOT ON MAY 26. WIFE OF DOCTOR WHO WORKS AT THE FRENCH HOSPITAL, WHERE MOST OF THE CASUALTIES WERE TREATED, CLAIMED THAT SEVERAL PEOPLE HAD DIED. SOME OF THE KUWAITI PLAYERS WHO WERE ATTACKED APPEARED TO HAVE SUFFERED SOME INJURIES. DURING A TELEVISED PRESENTATION OF MEDALS TO THE SECOND-PLACE KUWAITI TEAM, ONE OF THE PLAYERS APPEARED WITH HIS ARM IN A SLING AND ANOTHER HAD HIS HEAD BANDAGED.

7. IN, PERHAPS, UNRELATED DEVELOPMENTS A NUMBER OF PROVINCIAL GOVERNORS WILL BE ROTATED. THE GOVERNOR OF KUNEITRA WILL GO TO DERA'A, DERA'A TO HOMS, HOMS TO HAMA, HAMA TO LATAKIA, AND LATAKIA TO KUNEITRA. THE ONLY GOVERNOR WHO

SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN DOWNGRADED IS HUSSEIN HAJ HUSSEIN,
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GOVERNOR OF LATAKIA AND A FORMER BAATH PARTY CHIEF FOR ALEPPO. HOWEVER, LOCAL EMBASSY EMPLOYEE, AMONG OTHERS, INFORMS US THAT THE RECENTLY APPOINTED GOVERNOR OF ALEPPO, HUSSEIN BATTAH (FORMERLY THE MILITARY INTELLIGENCE CHIEF FOR THE DISTRICT) IS FAR TOO AUTOCRATIC IN HIS APPROACH TO BOTH THE BAATH PARTY APPARATUS AND THE LEADING PERSONALITIES OF THE PROVINCE, AND RUMORS ARE RIFE THAT HAJ HUSSEIN WILL REPLACE HIM GIVEN HIS POPULARITY WITHIN THE ALEPPO BRANCH OF THE PARTY.

8. FINALLY, A MAJOR SHAKEUP OF THE THREE DAMASCUS NEWSPAPERS HAS JUST BEEN COMPLETED. AL-BAATH ON MAY 31 ANNOUNCED THAT A NEW DIRECTOR-GENERAL, YASSER AL-FARRA, AND DEPUTY DIRECTOR-GENERAL (EDITORS) FOR THE PAPER HAVE BEEN APPOINTED. THIS FOLLOWS SIMILAR CHANGES IN THE LAST TWO MONTHS AT AL-THAWRA AND TISHRIIN. LOCAL JOURNALIST INFORMS US THAT FOUR OR FIVE EDITORIAL EMPLOYEES OF DAMASCUS DAILIES ALSO HAVE LOST THEIR JOBS. (COMMENT: FORMER AL-BAATH DIRECTOR BAGAJATI WAS LIKED BY HIS STAFF, AND HE MAY HAVE BEEN TOO LENIENT IN ADMINISTERING GOVERNMENT PRESS GUIDANCE. WHILE MOST OF PRESS ESTABLISHMENT ARE CLOSED MOUTH ABOUT REASONS FOR THE SHAKEUP, IT APPEARS THAT ASSAD NOW HAS ABSOLUTE LOYALISTS HEADING THE MEDIA. FARRA'S CHOICE PUZZLING SINCE HE IS A FORMER AMBASSADOR TO NORTH KOREA AND HIS JOURNALISTIC CREDENTIALS, IF ANY, ARE UNKNOWN TO US. WE SHALL ATTEMPT TO REPORT FURTHER BY SEPTELS REASONS BEHIND THESE TRANSFERS.)

9. COMMENT: AS WE HAVE REPORTED ANTI-REGIME VIOLENCE HAS RECENTLY BECOME EXTREMELY SELECTIVE AND DISCRIMINATING. PROMINENT ALAWITES ARE BEING KILLED AND THE PLACING OF EXPLOSIVES IN CROWDED AREAS HAS BEEN ABANDONED AS A TACTIC. WHILE BURNING GOVERNMENT-OWNED STORES MAY STRIKE A RESPONSIVE CHORD AMONG SOME WHO ARE UPSET WITH INFLATION, THE BURNING
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OF UNIVERSITY LABORATORIES HARMS THE COUNTRY AND HAS NO APPARENT SYMBOLISM. IT IS POSSIBLE THAT THE LABORATORY FIRE WAS NOT ARSON OR, AT LEAST, NOT COMMITTED BY THE SAME PEOPLE RESPONSIBLE FOR OTHER ANTI-REGIME ACTS.
PELLETREAU

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: REPORTS, GOVERNMENT REFORM, CIVIL DISORDERS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 02 jun 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978DAMASC03187
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: X4
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780240-0017
Format: TEL
From: DAMASCUS
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t197806104/aaaadlea.tel
Line Count: 221
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: cd68147d-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 5
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 28 jun 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 2149716
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: INTERNAL ROUNDUP: MORE ANTI-REGIME VIOLENCE AND SOME GOVERNMENT TRANSFERS
TAGS: PINT, PINS, SY
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odb://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/cd68147d-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014